A year ago, I was working part-time as a route setter at a rock climbing gym in Tennessee. Today, I’m working as a software engineer at a cybersecurity startup in San Francisco.

My journey to this point has been unforgettable and life-changing. And even if everything was challenging, I think any sufficiently motivated person could do the same.

Knowledge has become democratized. All you need to be competitive in your field is time and dedication, and this is especially true for software engineering.

**My life was falling apart**

When I started learning to code in 2016, I guess you could say that my life was falling apart.

I went to college as a pre-med student, with degrees in biochemistry and anthropology. But I quickly became disenchanted with science and medicine and left college with no clear path.

I started working as a route setter at rock climbing gyms for almost two years, but things were not going so well. I knew I was in need of a big change.

I had been putting off learning to code for a long time but I knew this was what I wanted to do. Finally, on my birthday in 2016, I committed to learn to code. I didn’t look back since.

At this point in time, I was vaguely familiar with the coding bootcamps that have become quite ubiquitous over the last few years. Luckily, I quickly discovered [Free Code Camp](https://www.freecodecamp.com/). When I realized that finishing the curriculum entailed writing software for nonprofit organizations, I promptly joined and resolved that I would finish the open source curriculum before even considering a bootcamp.

**Learning to code**

Free Code Camp rapidly became the core of my education. I supplemented it with many other resources such as podcasts, tutorials, open courseware, and healthy doses of documentation and Stack Overflow when needed.

My typical days involved me working through the curriculum’s challenges and projects, which allowed me to progressively improve my skills. When sitting and writing code became unproductive, I would absorb material through other channels—audio, video, and so on. I moved back and forth between different learning methods, which was very useful in maintaining a strong level of engagement and focus. This was basically my process and it allowed me to dedicate many hours to learning.

Here it is by the numbers (roughly estimated):

* Total duration learning: less than 12 months
* Total hours: approximately 2,500 hours
* Total projects completed: more than 70
* Total CS courses watched: approximately 10
* Total GitHub commits: over 1,500
* Total lines of JavaScript written: more than 20,000

Most of this learning took place in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was living at the time. I had a strong desire to move to one of the major tech cities, so one day I woke up and naturally decided it was time to drive to San Francisco. That’s about exactly how it happened.

I left that night and arrived in the Bay Area about three weeks later. There was plenty of time to listen to podcasts on the road.

*Somewhere in midwest USA.*

**Arriving in San Francisco for my first real job search**

After arriving in San Francisco and completing the core curriculum (frontend, data visualization, and backend certifications), I had a brief go at job applications—around 65 or so—but there was literally no response.

Remember, I had just driven into the Bay Area from across the country. I had no idea how competitive it would be or how much my skills were even worth to employers at their current level. Did Free Code Camp actually measure up to the education of an in-person coding bootcamp?

These feeler applications gave me a clear reading: I had to do more. The market *was*pretty competitive. So, I rapidly revised my plans, extended my time horizon, and reached out to Free Code Camp to begin a [nonprofit project](https://medium.freecodecamp.com/how-i-made-my-first-million-dollars-in-pro-bono-code-86f911040484) since I was now eligible to start one (Free Code Camp itself is nonprofit).

Some of my React projects had caught the eye of [Michael D. Johnson](https://medium.com/@CodeNonprofit) and [Quincy Larson](https://medium.com/@quincylarson)who asked me whether I’d be interested in helping write their React curriculum. I also helped build a conference management tool for the [Conference on Crimes Against Women](http://www.conferencecaw.org/).

I was very excited about the opportunity to give back to this awesome community, so I quickly accepted the challenge. My React and Redux challenges are being incorporated into their newly expanded curriculum, [which is now live in beta form here](http://beta.freecodecamp.com/en/).

In addition, I chose to advance my timeline to 2017. I would continue studying on my own before applying for jobs again. I left San Francisco, driving north through Portland and Seattle to Bellingham, Washington.

It was during these weeks in the Pacific Northwest that I worked nonstop to complete the React and Redux challenges. I collaborated with another contributor from New York, [Peter Weinberg](https://github.com/no-stack-dub-sack), and built around a total of 80 coding challenges. This was probably one of the key moves that helped set my resume apart because it represented a significant project that served a real-world organization’s needs.

In late December, we finished the initial draft of the challenges and moved them into an [official alpha release](http://hysterical-amusement.surge.sh/), which is still generating feedback from the community.

**My triumphant return to San Francisco**

Back in San Francisco, I was almost ready to dive into job applications again. I had decided to join [Outco](https://outco.io/" \t "_blank), a crash course in interview preparation for software engineers. I had always been pretty opposed to spending money at a coding bootcamp (partly because I didn’t have the money), but I chose to join this course because in my view, they are trying to serve a different purpose. It is specifically targeting the interview process for software engineers, a process which causes friction for many, including even experienced and skilled engineers.

Although I could write JavaScript pretty well at this point, I definitely was not prepared to solve arbitrary algorithm questions on a whiteboard. That’s one of the key areas Outco tries to prepare students for because for better or worse, whiteboarding remains a favorite interview tactic of tech companies.

Reality check: I had been going many months at a strong pace of probably more than 50 hours a week of coding and learning, and I was literally risking it all on my ability to get a job in one of the most expensive and competitive cities in the US.

I had already made a sincere effort to apply to companies and failed miserably! The pressure and stress were definitely bearing down on me at this point.

I knew success was going to depend heavily on my performance of the next few months.

*Writing code on paper to prepare for interviews–classic.*

I began to work even harder—tons of practice on algorithms and data structures, whiteboarding questions, technical questions, pair programming, mock phone screens, systems design questions, you name it (not to mention applying to jobs again, and a lot more than I did the first time).

And of course, once you begin to get responses from companies, it becomes very time-consuming and stressful to begin juggling all of these interviews at once.

Practicing for interviews every day is hard enough. Standing in front of a whiteboard in a real interview as they ask you about binary trees is much harder. And yes, interviewers asked me about binary trees.

Again, the numbers tell the story more eloquently:

* Total applications: 192 (including the 65 from 2016)
* Total phone interviews: 17
* Total take-home code challenges: 6
* Total technical screens: 5
* Total on-sites: 3
* Total offers: 1
* Total time to offer: 6 weeks
* Success Rate: 0.52 percent

That one offer was from [Trustar Technology](https://www.trustar.co/" \t "_blank), and I have been so happy to join their team. The company is building a platform that allows businesses to share cyber-intelligence data in order to prevent and mitigate cyberattacks.

I’m working on the frontend side of their application and putting to use the JavaScript skills I gained. The experience has been incredible so far, and I have been honestly surprised by how well-prepared I have been to begin making meaningful contributions to their codebase.

**Lessons I learned over the past 12 months**

Now, finally, here is some advice I would have for anyone looking to do something like this.

* You need real-world skills and you have to learn a lot. That means a lot of hours of work; there’s no way around it, but passion helps.
* Building projects is an excellent way to learn and once you know enough, it is not very hard to find open source projects or other high-impact projects to work on.
* JavaScript and React are great to learn and in high demand, but learn what interests you.
* It’s critical that you cultivate a community of those who are learning to code or working as engineers. Network in your city or online, find collaborative projects to work on, and ask for help.
* If you can afford it, try to have some patience. This is what I struggled with the most.

There you have it—the journey that led me across the US to begin a career as a software engineer. I’m sure everyone’s path will look different, and that’s part of the fun.

Find your own path and don’t be afraid to disregard other people’s views if you believe strongly enough in your own. That includes my views.

The opportunities in the tech industry are real, and if you want them badly enough, you can find a way there.

As an engineer, your job will be to solve problems, and if you are self-taught, the first problem you must solve is how to teach yourself.

Cheers everyone, and happy coding!

P.S. A huge shoutout and thank you to the entire Free Code Camp community and everyone I mentioned in this article and a few others—Archie, Christian, Beemer Girl, and all my friends from home. You have all proven invaluable in helping me accomplish this goal.

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